MICHAEL WOLFF ON THE MAKING OF A MEDIA SUPERHERO

AN EXCLUSIVE EXCERPT FROM HIS NEW BOOK 'AUTUMN OF THE MOGULS'

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THE 2003 Chefs Awards

PLUS

Holiday Pleasures

What the City's Top Toques Serve Their Own Families and Friends

By Gillian Duffy

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KURT GUTENBRUNNER
WALLSÉ, CAFÉ SABARSKY

A TRUE HOLIDAY CHESTNUT.

The dish on the dish: There is always a soup on an Austrian menu. Chestnuts are now in season, as are celery root and mushrooms; together they make an elegant soup for the holidays. The armagnac prunes happened by accident. I was making them for a dessert and tried it with the soup, and it worked. As for the mélange—cappuccino is called mélange in Vienna—the soup looks like a cappuccino with the frothy topping.
Holiday affair: I always take off the 24th and 25th of December; I like to serve a big dinner on Christmas Day for family and friends, with the kids eating early. The grown-ups can then sit down and enjoy a relaxed meal. I *hate* buffets. I grew up in Austria with a whole deer hanging on the balcony, so venison is a tradition for the holidays.

CHESTNUT-SOUP VIENNESE MÊLANGE WITH BLACK TRUFFLES

Serves 8.

- ¼ cup armagnac or cognac
- 8 whole pitted prunes
- 12 ounces button mushrooms, washed
- 2 dried porcini mushrooms or other flavorful dried mushrooms
- 1 pound fresh peeled chestnuts
- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1 medium-size celery root, peeled, dark spots removed, and diced
- Salt and white pepper
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- 4 cups chicken stock
- 1 cup heavy cream
- 2 cups skim milk, hot
- ⅛ teaspoon nutmeg
- Garnish: 1 fresh black truffle (optional)
- 8 parsley leaves

SMOOTHIE: Kurt Gutenbrunner's savory chestnut soup.

Early in the day or the night before, put the armagnac, prunes, and ½ cup water in a saucepan, and bring to a simmer. Remove from heat, cover the pan, and allow the prunes to steep for 6 hours or overnight. (The prunes can be refrigerated in an airtight jar for a week.)

Put the button mushrooms in a saucepan, cover with water, and simmer for 1 hour. Remove and discard the mushrooms (there should be at least 1 cup of juice). Pulverize the dried porcini mushrooms in a coffee grinder.

Preheat oven to 375 degrees. With a sharp paring knife, cut an X into the flat side of each chestnut. Place the nuts in a single layer on a baking sheet, and roast in the middle of the oven for 10 to 12 minutes, until the shell curls. Remove from oven, and allow to cool. Peel and discard the shells, reserving the chestnuts.

> "The armagnac prunes happened by accident. I was making them for dessert and tried it with the soup, and it worked."—KURT GUTENBRUNNER

Melt the butter over low heat in a large, heavy saucepan. Add the celery root, and cook gently for 5 minutes without browning. Add the peeled chestnuts, and season with salt and pepper. Stir in the sugar, increase the heat, and cook for a few minutes, until the mixture caramelizes. Add the remaining armagnac and cook for a minute. Pour in the reserved mushroom juice and the chicken stock, reduce the heat, and cook slowly for 15